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ABSTRACT

THE OVERHEAD PROJECTOR, USED AS A CONTROLLABLE BLACKBOARD OR BULLETIN BOARD IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING, EXTENDS THE RANGE OF TEACHING TECHNIQUES SO THAT AN INSTRUCTOR MAY (1) PREPARE, IN ADVANCE, HANDWRITTEN SHEETS OF FILM--TEST QUESTIONS, PUPILS' SENTENCES, QUOTATIONS, SHORT POEMS--TO BE SHOWN IN ANY ORDER OR FORM; (2) USE PICTURES, GRAPHICS, OR CARTOONS AS SUBJECTS FOR CREATIVE COMPOSITION; (3) WRITE COMMENTS ON A PREPARED TEXT OR A PUPIL'S COMPOSITION TRANSFERRED TO FILM; OR (4) CREATE DIAGRAMS OR SYMBOLS TO AID IN THE DISCUSSION OF A COMPOSITION. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE MANY ADVANTAGES TO AN OVERHEAD PROJECTOR, IT IS LIMITED BECAUSE ONLY A SHORT PASSAGE OF A COMPOSITION CAN BE SHOWN AT ONE TIME, LARGE PRINT MUST BE USED, AND THE MATERIALS MUST BE READ LINE BY LINE FROM THE SCREEN. HOWEVER, THE VALUE OF THE OVERHEAD LIES IN THE TEACHER'S INCREASED ABILITY TO CONTROL THE VISUAL CONTENT OF HIS MESSAGE WITHOUT TOTAL RELIANCE UPON ORAL DIRECTIONS AND REPETITIONS. (JM)

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Commission on English

The Use of the Overhead Projector in Teaching Composition

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College Entrance
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Your classroom is probably set up for testing writing, not for teaching it. Nonetheless, if it is possible, pupils should see some of their work discussed and criticized before they produce the final paper. Your pupils should *see* and hear you react to their scratches on paper. They should see you as you mark a paper. Sometimes they should see how other pupils did an assignment.

After all, writing is making symbols and patterns visible for another individual. Students of the process, your pupils and mine, should constantly be seeing what they are doing.

If students could see more of their own and others' writing, they would perhaps be less timid, more willing to take chances with language, less constricted by fear of error, more willing to break their pitiful rules of thumb and private formulas.

Send pupils to the blackboard more often. Have some of them copy their papers onto ditto stencils. Or, as I shall suggest in this film, use the overhead projector. The hardware is not important. The practice of letting pupils see what you mean and what they have done *is* important.

The overhead projector is a machine for throwing the contents of a big transparency onto a screen before a class in a lighted room; it is not a new way of teaching. The principles are the same as those that govern the use of the chalkboard, the picture held before the class, or the paper with writing on it. All that the overhead projector does is to aid visibility and to increase the control the teacher has over what the pupil can see.

This is the script of one of the kinescopes produced by the Commission on English of the College Entrance Examination Board. Widely used for department meetings and conferences and in teacher-training courses, the film is available for 16mm sound motion picture projection and for television.

A copy of the kinescope can be borrowed from the Commission on English office. Requests to use kinescopes should be in writing. Reservations, whenever possible, should be made at least two months in advance of a planned showing. The borrower pays only for shipping.

The technical possibilities of the projector are quickly told. Facing the class with the overhead at your side you can do several things.

(a) Write on a plastic sheet on the light-stage of the projector; you can also make white writing appear on a black field.

(b) Write comments on a prepared text; show all the text at once, or reveal it line by line as you read, or highlight a single word.

(c) Write comments on a composition written directly on film by the pupil, or write comments on a pupil's composition that has been transferred to film.

(d) Erase part of what you have put down, or remove all of your comments by lifting a film overlaid on the text.

(e) Use pictures, graphics, and cartoons as subjects for creative compositions.

(f) Create your own diagrams and symbols to aid your discussion of the composition.

(g) With the aid of a thermal copier, you can convert a pupil's penciled composition into a transparency in the same period that the pupil writes it; you place the pupil's penciled sentence or paragraph underneath a film and run both through the copier.

Interesting as these techniques may be, teachers who have not personally tried them will, of course, have reservations. In this film I will repeat several of these techniques in more detail in order to answer some of the questions.

But before I do that, it may be best to make clear the limitations of overhead projection so that you do not expect too much. The overhead projector will allow you to do the things I have shown, but there are certain things to remember.

1. It is difficult under most projection conditions to show an entire composition. For overhead, short passages are best. Pupils' compositions should be printed on the horizontal axis to make use of the top two-thirds of the screen. With this in mind, you can mimeograph composition sheets

that have the lines going the long way. The lines should be slightly wider than a conventional composition paper to encourage the pupil to write larger. Again, reading comfort is the object.

2. Ordinary elite or pica typescript is too small to be read by pupils in the back half of the room. To test print size, hold the copy or the transparency at arm's length. If you can read it without eye strain, it will be all right for the classroom.

3. Line by line reading from a screen is difficult. The eye is accustomed to taking in whole fields at a distance of more than three feet. If you were to throw this printed test on a screen, your eyes would bounce from part to part, even though you know how to read it. So you should assist the reader's eye by pacing down the page. Usually you have to read aloud at the time of showing even when text is enlarged.

At times, of course, it is useful to have many things on the blackboard at the same time. The overhead is not good for that. Then, too, teachers who need the physical activity of blackboard writing will find that this substitute for chalk and chalkboard is not satisfying. But if one idea at a time is what you want, and if some of your physical activity while at the board is distracting rather than instructive, then writing on projected film is better than chalk and slate—or chalk and painted wallboard.

It is *possible* by color-lifting to get some magazine pictures onto film, but 35mm slides or the actual pictures serve better. For overhead, in general, stick to line and mass, to pure color masses and simple shape, to simple pictures, to lithographs, cartoons, graphics, diagrams, and, above all, to large handwriting.

Let me show you here what the teacher does at the projector, how he get pupils' work into usable form, and how he overcomes some of the difficulties and limitations of the medium.

I will demonstrate again some techniques passed over briefly at the beginning. Let me show the simplest applications first, and, begging the pardon of those who have some familiarity with overhead projection, let

me assume that you have never used such a machine before and wish to begin in a small way.

The simplest use of the overhead is as a desk-side blackboard. What you write on the light-table appears on the screen behind you, over your head, in full view of the class.

For one thing, you can erase more easily and quickly. For another, you can prepare handwritten sheets of film in advance. Test questions, answers to test questions, pupils' sentences, quotations, short poems—these you may put on the screen when you wish, in any order, and you may leave them there for as long as you like. You can remove them by turning off the machine, or by taking the transparency off. Of course, you can immediately put back what you have "erased" in this way.

As you have perhaps realized, the overhead can replace some present uses of duplicated material. But there are other times when you will want pupils to have a dittoed copy of what you are working over before them on the screen while they are doing the same working over on the paper at their desks. If your original is large-typed or in pencil, the same machine that makes a transparency will also make a purple stencil good for 60 or more copies. This master can be run like any other on a spirit machine. You then can make a film copy from the same original.

Let me explain in detail one of the applications just mentioned, using pupils' sentences. Suppose that as I correct a set of papers, I notice that more than a few of my pupils are using "and" where other connectives would serve better or are using sentence fragments. On a few of the papers I circle "and" sentences or the sentence fragments and write in the margin, "Copy onto film." At the beginning of class the next day I return the papers, giving to the "Copy onto film" pupils a china-marking pencil and a transparency containing nothing but lines. The pupils copy the circled sentences and hand the films (and pencils) to me. The sentences are projected one at a time and discussed just as I would discuss them if the pupils had gone to the board.

The advantage of having the sentences on film, however, is that there is only one sentence before the class at one time. I can save these samples if I wish. If I want the pupils in the class to make revisions following my explanation, I can do my correcting on a piece of film overlaid on the pupil's writing.

I can, of course, copy samples from pupils' compositions as I read them. That is, as I correct papers at my desk at night, I can keep lined film and a china-marking pencil close by. I copy sentences from pupils' papers directly onto sheets of film to be used in class the next day.

A slight variation on this application can be achieved by having pupils write directly on film in the classroom. If I do not want the bother of giving film and pencils to *all* pupils (and I usually do not), I can walk around the class as pupils write. When I see a sentence that should be before the whole class, I put down a film and a pencil and tell the pupil to copy a particular part of what he has done. Before everyone has finished, I have discussion material for the last part of the hour. This practice gives a few pupils the benefit of an "open conference," and sends all the pupils off with a better idea of what I want them to do on the homework that night. This "open conference" use of the pupils' work seems to me the most important value of overhead projection. I will come back to it later.

Or let us say you want pupils to be active during an explanation of some rhetorical principle. As an alternative to explaining fully and answering questions (if there are any) and sending the pupils off into the wilderness on their own, you can punctuate your explanation with feedback from them. If the class is hearing about first sentences, have them try their hand very early in your exposition of the principles. Pupils can copy some of their opening sentences onto film. You can then project them and amend your explanation of the principles. Further, if you have copies of several pupils' opening sentences, it is useful to ask the same questions serially of a number of samples from the class before you. Not some textbook sentences—*their* sentences. As you put each pupil's writing on the

screen, for example, you might ask the same series of questions:

How does the writer show an awareness of his audience?

Does the sentence set a direction for the reader's thoughts?

Or ask whatever questions you usually ask, whatever questions will repeatedly call attention to the presence or absence of the important components of the rhetorical principle you are explaining.

So far I have illustrated the possibilities of working with pupils' sentences directly copied by them or by you onto transparent sheets. You can see the possibilities here for using pupils' writing for *teaching* writing rather than just *testing* writing. When we always give assignments and send the pupils off to finish them alone without checking back, all their writing is a test; they have had no feedback. As I said at the beginning, pupils will take few chances under these circumstances. They will play it safe. But if they can see some of their work before they produce the final paper that will be graded, they are more likely to be their natural selves and less likely to make stupid blunders.

Other uses of the projector are possible when a copying machine is used. The most common of these devices uses a heat process to convert a pencil or printed line into a line on film. (The fastest and simplest copiers now available will not reproduce ink or conventional ball point writing. Get a stock of pencils.)

Using the thermal copying technique in a recent lesson on model writing, I was able to get copies of seven pupils' work on a single sheet of film. This is what I did. Pupils were shown a model—E. B. White's injunction: "Don't write about *Man*; write about *a* man"—and were asked to imitate the form of that sentence with a thought of their own. Each pupil was instructed to write his sentence on the top line of a sheet of composition paper turned upside down. I fanned the papers down, put a sheet of thermal film on top, and ran all of them through the copying machine in a single operation. In this way I copied seven samples on a single sheet of film with a single pass through the machine.

Don't speak of war; speak of peace.
Don't go in a house; go in the house.
Don't look up to God; look up to guidance.
Don't talk about people in that way; and they won't talk about you.
Don't describe about your many adventures; describe about one important experience.
Don't praise the strong man; praise the wise man.
Don't withhold your praise; withhold your criticism.

These were then put on the screen and discussed one at a time. I was stunned by what came back and in this instance I quickly learned how difficult a task I had assigned, or how stupidly I had assigned it. But I learned it only because I got the feedback. The connection between White's form and content were at once so intimate and so sophisticated that pupils were not able to use the model.

I had a similar reminder of the limitations of the pupils' understanding when I was working with their conversion of passive sentences into active ones. The assignment involved their use of a picture. On the left of the picture two keys are hanging by a string; on the right the keys have fallen apparently for the string is broken. I asked, "What happened to the keys? One, tell me first in a passive sentence; two, convert it to an active voice sentence; three, tell me the kernel pattern of your second sentence." The sentences were written on the special composition pages that I talked about earlier. Here is one of the papers: "The worn string has been broken by the weight of the keys; the weight of the keys has broken the string; SVO." This boy has it right. He sees it. Others see it.

These papers and others were discussed before the class. I could take one sentence at a time and control what the pupils were looking at. No names were showing and no grades were given, but the idea was made clearer, both by discussing errors and by showing that some pupils had done it correctly. Certainly, I was advised of the inadequacy of my instruction before we had gone very far.

Let me emphasize that the overhead projector gives you a kind of controllable blackboard, or bulletin board. It should not be thought of as having any attention-getting value—any more than the blackboards or bulletin boards of themselves draw the eye or stir the mind. It depends on what you put on them.

The overhead, however, does give control. It makes easily visible *what* you are talking about. And it does help pupils to know what it is, even if they don't know what it means.

If, for example, you use projected pictures as subjects for some composition work, the pupil has a constant visual clue to the problem he grapples with. Oral directions are not like that. With the inevitable refinements and qualifications and restatements—these efforts of ours to "help" —sometimes pupils are helped too much. Pupils already confused by our verbal help will pump us until they can write without actually thinking. For pupils with poor verbal memories, words coming at them, then coming again—slightly altered—are mere symbols of past failures and frustrations with print and words. A picture stays the same except as the pupil's mind sees it. The picture is not in words: it *is*. The pupil must do the word-finding.

Seeing makes a difference if we are to teach writing. Reading aloud, make no mistake, has great value as a revision technique. And in class it has great value as a reward for the valiant writer. But the sentence read aloud flies away. It is not the object of study like a sentence on paper, on the blackboard, or on the screen.